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THE POETS AND THE DAISY

Can anybody furnish a satisfactory explanation of the old and lingering superstition that poets are the innovators of humanity? As a matter of fact, poets are of all folk the most conservative. Should you disagree with this assertion, turn for a moment to the beds and borders of the poetic garden. First you will be impressed, and perhaps a little disconcerted, by their amazing richness in "buds, and bells, and stars without a name"; but these flowers of make-believe may be disregarded for the phantoms they are. Then—for the moment we will pardon your vandalism—root up all the roses and lilies and violets and poppies you find, and you will leave the place much in the condition of a field of young corn invaded by a multitude of sheep. With your spoil in a mountainous heap before you, sit down on the grass and briefly consider it. Doubtless God could have made four flowers more obviously destined for poetic use, but certainly God never did. The flaunting rose; and the lily, even more pretentious in its melodramatic assumption of modesty and chastity; the violet, with its divine scent, asymmetrical symmetry, and truly recluse habits; the poppy, a very Cleopatra of flowers, queening it with the swarthy, indolent beauty of "the serpent of the old Nile"; as alluring, as seductive, as inspiring—and as lethal. The place of these flowers in poetry was no less inevitable than their place in the average garden.

As to the flowers next in poetic favor, I do not propose to commit myself. Wherever metre is, amaranth and asphodel are seldom far away; but these are blooms of no earthly meadow. Asphodel was a reality to the Greeks, but in Western Europe it has degenerated or sublimed—it is all a matter of view-point—into the merest of disembodied, sapless symbols; amaranth was never anything else. Daffodils have thrust their stout bulbs deep into the soil of many a poetic orchard-close, and richly deserve the place they have won themselves. But of all candidates for poetic honors, considered solely for intrinsic qualities, surely the least promising is the daisy.

As a youth, I was sorely puzzled by the wealth of daisy-

poetry, and not a little indignant that so much homage should have been paid to so insignificant a pretender. The daisy is not a beautiful flower ; or rather it is not beautiful as an iris is, or even as the birdsfoot trefoil or scarlet pimpernel. To be strictly judicial, it must be given æsthetic place a thought higher than the dandelion or shepherd's purse—perhaps on the plane of its neighbors, the bugle and common clover. In those days, I was as yet incapable of reckoning with the power of "the association of ideas," but in these days I understand and appreciate this human weakness or glory ; and with my sympathy is coupled a sincere personal love for the tiny disc of gold and ray of scattered pearl which form the key to many a closed casket of hours and days and years of pearl and gold. When Tom and Maggie Tulliver went down together by Tofton town on the flooded Floss, their last thought was of "the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together"; and that one simple touch of unstrained realism is a tribute to the genius of George Eliot worthier than a multitude of her cumbrous and overladen metaphors and similes. The images a daisy will conjure up! The breadths of sun-scorched meadow, and cloud-fondled mountainsides; the mounded sanctuaries of tiny God's-acres, and grass-grown court-yards of shattered castles; the tennis-lawns and polo-grounds and college quadrangles; the sudden rapture of a green square deep in the dull heart of a dull city; the memories of youth and tears and laughter and handclasps and fun and folly! From Alaska to the Himalayas, sooner or later your feet are sure of pressing a daisy. "The last Amen of nature is always a flower," and more often than not the flower is a daisy.

On examining the daisy-verses of the poets we find, as might reasonably be expected, the greater number inspired by those memories and suggestions and associations which have so indissolubly interwoven with the warp and woof of human destiny the daisy-chains of childhood. The daisy-song of Bliss Carman depends entirely for its sentiment upon this association of ideas; and the result—except for one dragging and one inconsequential line—is every whit as fresh, as unpretentious and as "right" as a daisy:—

Over the shoulders and slopes of the dune
 I saw the white daisies go down to the sea ;
 A host in the sunshine, an army in June,
 The people God sends us to set our hearts free.

The bobolinks rallied them up from the dell,
 The orioles whistled them out of the wood ;
 And all of their singing was, " Earth, it is well !"
 And all of their dancing was, " Life, thou art good !"

The following stanzas from John Davidson, although by no means representative of Davidson at his best, are worthy of quotation as perhaps the most complete poetic exposition of the true spell of the most human of flowers :—

The vanguards of the daisies come,
 Summer's crusaders sanguine-stained,
 The only flowers that left their home
 When happiness in Eden reigned.

They strayed abroad, old writers tell,
 Hardy and bold, east, west, south, north :
 Our guilty parents, when they fell,
 And flaming vengeance drove them forth,

Their haggard eyes in vain to God,
 To all the stars of heaven turned ;
 But when they saw where in the sod,
 The golden-hearted daisies burned,

Sweet thoughts that still within them dwelt
 Awoke, and tears embalmed their smart ;
 On Eden's daisies couched they felt
 They carried Eden in their heart.

In the same "Eclogue," the sentiment is repeated in different form, this time in a passage perfect in lilt and phrasing :—

When a maiden's dainty shoe
 Can cover nine, the gossips know
 The fullness of the Spring is due.

In another poem, Davidson has turned the flower to exquisite metaphorical use,—

They may doom till the moon forsakes
 Her dark, star-daisied lawn.

Wither (metaphorically) pats himself upon the back for his appreciation of so insignificant a flower :—

By a daisy, whose leaves spread
Shut when Titan goes to bed ;
Or a shady bush or tree,
She (the muse) could more infuse in me,
Than all Nature's beauties can
In some other wiser man.

In the poem occasioned by the immortal daisy "turned down" by Burns's ploughshare, again the note of apology is struck, and again the strings of sweet and bitter memories are touched :—

The flaunting flowers our garden yield,
High shelt'ring woods and wa's maun shield ;
But thou, beneath the random field
O' clod or stane,
Adorns the histie stibble field,
Unseen, alane.

But the dominant and insistent theme—unique in daisy-poetry—is the prophetic sense of the absolute oneness, in life and death, of the lot of daisy and poet :—

Wee, modest, crimson-tippèd flow'r,
Thou's met me in an evil hour ;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem :
To spare thee now is past my pow'r ;
Thou bonnie gem.
.
.
.
Ev'n thou who mourn'st the Daisy's fate,
That fate is thine —no distant date ;
Stern Ruin's plough-share drives elate,
Full on thy bloom,
Till crush'd beneath the furrow's weight,
Shall be thy doom !

Wordsworth approaches the daisy from most of the possible standpoints. Fancy, imagination, apology, vindication, memories, associations, realism ; all have a place in his sheaf of daisy-poems. His one perfect stanza—an example of those passages with the color and glitter and purity and simplicity of thirteenth-century stained glass, with not a little, too, of its *naïveté*, which reconcile us to many a league of his colorless metrical prose—is inspired by an encounter with the flower under the ideal condition of *distance* :—

I see thee glittering from afar ; —
And then thou art a pretty star ;

Not quite so fair as many are
 In heaven above thee!
 Yet like a star, with glittering crest,
 Self-poised in air, thou seem'st to rest;
 May peace come never to his nest,
 Who shall reprove thee!

Shelley, wisely, takes his daisies in the mass; and the resulting image—for all the faultiness of construction in the passage—is in the highest degree magical and haunting:—

Daisies, those pearled Arcturi of the earth,
 The constellated flower that never sets.

Of all the imaginative and decorative uses of the daisy in poetry, probably the most exquisite is to be found in the description of Diana's kerchief in *Endymion*:—

Blue, and over-spangled with a million
 Of little eyes, as though thou wert to shed,
 Over the darkest, lushest blue-bell bed,
 Handfuls of daisies.

But with the daisy, as a daisy, Keats is not content. He must be wandering—

Elysian lawns
 Browsed by none but Dian's fawns;
 Where the daisies are rose-scented,
 And the rose herself has got
 Perfume which on earth is not.

Shakespeare has several references to the daisy, but only two in any way noteworthy. First, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the happy "daisies pied"; then, in *The Rape of Lucrece*, the admirable imagery of—

Without the bed her other fair hand was
 On the green coverlet, whose perfect white
 Showed like an April daisy on the grass.

If only our immortal William had been content to leave it at that, and spared us the atrocious—

With pearly sweat, resembling dew of night!

The "dew of night" is legitimate enough as a poetic property; but it scarcely adds to our edification to be told that Lucrece perspired in her sleep.

Tennyson has at least three uses of the daisy. First, the oldest and commonest of all:—

We took our last adieu,
And up the snowy Splugen drew,
But ere we reach'd the highest summit
I pluck'd a daisy, I gave it you.
It told of England then to me,
And now it tells of Italy.
O love, we two shall go no longer
To lands of summer across the sea.

Next, the popular conceit in *Maud*, a thought flamboyant, but nevertheless beautiful:—

Her feet have touch'd the meadows
And left the daisies rosy.

And lastly, the scientifically-observed daisy:—

Quick tears that make the rose
Pull sideways, and the daisy close
Her crimson fringes to the shower.

Chaucer, almost alone amongst poets, has nothing of apology in his companionship of the daisy. In the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, enchanting use is made of its color-scheme in the description of the dress of Alcestis, led into the May meadow by Cupid,—

. . . . clad in real habit grene.
A fret of gold she hadde next hir heer,
And upon that a whyt coroun she beer
With florouns smale, and I shal nat lye;
For al the world, ryght as a dayesye
Y-corouned is with whyte leves lyte,
So were the florouns of hir coroun whyte.
For of o perle fyne, oriental,
Hir whyte coroun was y-maked al;
For which the whyte coroun, above the grene,
Made hir lyk a daysie for to sene,
Considered eek hir fret of gold above.

In the same prologue, with the courage of a robust age, he crowns and thrones the daisy in a fashion ventured, I think, by no later poet:—

. . . leninge on myn elbowe and my syde,
The longe day I shoop me for to abyde,
For nothing elles, and I shal nat lye,
But for to loke upon the dayesye,
That wel by reson men hit calle may
The 'dayesye' or elles the 'ye of day,'
The emperice and flour of floures alle.

And here one may in all confidence cross swords with him. It is probable that nineteen-twentieths of our garden-flowers were unknown to thirteenth-century England; and in that time of difficult and perilous travel, many of the rarer wild-flowers were more or less inaccessible. But if the daisy is to be—

Emperice and flour of floures alle,

then where in the floral kingdom is place to be found for the water-lily, the meadow geranium, meadowsweet, or the common heath? Surely nowhere within its limits at all, but rather must they be regarded as deities from some floral Olympus, condescending to share the common earth and breathe the common air with the lesser flowers and their “emperice.”

In conclusion, if one may venture so impertinent a question, why has the *buttercup* come in for so little attention from the poets, since the daisy has received so much? Certainly it is less ubiquitous, but probably it stands a good second in the list of our commonest flowers. And counting heads, before the great buttercup-decapitation in mowing-time, the daisy would be nowhere. Moreover, it is so much more beautiful a flower. Beautiful “glittering from afar”; and beautiful and more beautiful the more curiously it is examined. Beautiful its cups brimming with passionate fire under a July sun, and equally beautiful the soft glow of its half-opened buds on a misty April morning. Can it be—dread thought!—that this poetic partiality is all a matter of nomenclature? “What’s in a name?”—to the weaver of verbal tapestries, much! And of all sweet sounds in the English tongue, few were more certainly predestined to poetic use than the softly sibilant, agreeably melancholy sigh of *daisy*. But the clattering concatenation of guttural syllables, each jarring the other in *buttercup*—here surely is a word for the fearless soul of a Browning, and for few others. Shakespeare got out of the difficulty by “cuckoo-buds”; but nobody knows a cuckoo-bud nowadays. Well may your Tennysons seek refuge in “crowfoot”; and well may your Shelleys and Swinburnes shrink appalled from the fearsome sound!

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